

# Career Development Center

OccidentalCollege



## **PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW**

The interview is a conversation in which you and an employer exchange information. Your objective is to get an offer of a job, and the employer's objective is to find out the following:

- What you have to offer (your skills, abilities, basic knowledge).
- Who you are (your personality, character, interests).
- Why you should be hired (you have what they are seeking). The interviewer will try to determine whether you will be an asset to the organization.

Your goal is to present yourself as the best candidate for the position and also to learn more about the position and the interviewer's organization to determine whether both are well suited for you and your career goals. Thus, the interview is a two-way discussion rather than an interrogation, as it is often perceived to be.

The interview is a vital step to obtaining a career position and often depends on your skills in marketing your potential. Do not miss out on a good position for which you are qualified due to a lack of preparation and practice. You need to be ready to answer questions about your career goals and background. You will also want to develop intelligent questions of your own to help you obtain the necessary information for making an informed decision. Furthermore, preparation helps build your self confidence in your interview skills and is the key to successful interviewing.

## **PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW**

You need to get your goals in focus. You need to know what you want, where you want to be, who can employ you and, most importantly, why you will be good at the job you seek. If you are undecided or unsure about the jobs that best match your skills, interests, and background, take time now to assess yourself and explore various career fields. It is very difficult and can be frustrating to conduct a job search if you are unsure about your career options.

### **Know Yourself**

Most interviews include questions regarding your qualifications, education, campus and community activities, prior work experience, personal characteristics, skills, and career interests. To prepare for answering questions about yourself, think about the following questions:

- Which personality characteristics and skills do I want to talk about?
- What job experiences are most relevant to this position?
- What did I gain from my college education? Focus on those experiences that best sell you for the position for which you are interviewing.

Identify your three main strengths. Be able to cite specific examples and apply these strengths directly to the requirements of the position you are seeking. You should also be prepared to state the reasons why you should be hired, what you have to offer the employer, and your interests in the position.

## **Research the Position**

Analyze the job description and how your background, skills, and experience apply to the position. Evaluate your interest in this career field and be able to verbalize it. If the job description is limited, research similar jobs in similar companies and look up information on the job title in various career information resources, such as the O\*Net.

## **Research the Employer and Industry**

It is important to learn as much as you can about the employer before you interview. By adequately researching the organization, you will have a much better chance of creating a positive impression.

The following questions can help guide your research:

- What are the organization's philosophy and goals?
- What are the size and structure of the organization?
- What are the organization's products and services?
- What is the organization known for?
- What are the geographical locations of its plants, stores, or sales outlets?
- How well is the organization doing? (growth patterns)
- Who are the organization's clientele or customers and major competitors?
- What are the organization's entry-level positions and career paths?
- What type of training does the organization offer its employees?

To obtain information about the employer, read company annual reports, recruiting brochures, promotional materials, job descriptions, trade journals, *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, and other business publications. Faculty, alumni, friends, and present employees can also be helpful sources of information.

## **Get References**

Speak directly with the people you are planning to name as references (prior employers, faculty members, etc.). Let them know the kinds of jobs you are applying for and what specific kinds of experiences and abilities you hope they can discuss about you. Give them a copy of your resume to refer to when called.

## **Practice, Practice, Practice!!!**

Many interview questions are predictable and can be anticipated prior to the interview. Practice speaking out loud in front of a mirror, into a tape recorder, or with a friend. You can also predict "job-specific" questions by analyzing the job description—duties, responsibilities, and skills of the position. Consider the kinds of questions you can expect during the interview and prepare thorough and complete answers to each question. Do not memorize your responses, but instead outline the key points that you want to stress. Role playing of the interview situation can be extremely helpful in providing you an opportunity to refine your interview techniques—to have a smoother, spontaneous flow of words and to become aware of your nonverbal communication (i.e., body posture, eye contact, voice quality). You may want to sign up for a mock interview in the Career Development Center.

## **DURING THE INTERVIEW**

### **First Impressions Count!**

- Be on time. Find out when and where the interview will take place and how to get there. Arrive 10 to 15 minutes early so you can relax.

- Dress appropriately; that is, according to the standards of the organization. Your appearance should project a conservative, businesslike image and should communicate that you are ready for a professional career.
- Greet the interviewer by name, with a smile and a firm handshake. Treat secretaries and receptionists in a polite and professional manner.
- Show your enthusiasm. Enthusiasm, energy, and a sense of humor can help create a good impression. Do not be passive or indifferent.

### **Interview Format**

The first few minutes of the interview are used to establish rapport and to help the job applicants feel more at ease. The interviewer may engage in small talk or ask questions about interests and hobbies. However, these first few minutes are where you make a first and lasting impression. This is a good opportunity to demonstrate your communication skills.

The next portion of the interview is spent in an exchange of information to determine whether a good "match" exists between the employer's needs and your skills and career objectives. The interviewer will ask questions about your qualifications, background, and career goals and will present additional information about the position and the organization. You will be expected to ask questions about the position and organization that will help you decide whether the opportunity is right for you.

Listen carefully to the questions and be sure you understand them. Answer the questions thoroughly by backing up your statements with specific examples of your skills, experiences, and accomplishments. However, do not give more information than what the interviewer is asking for. In addition, emphasize your strong points at every appropriate opportunity in the interview. You want to avoid negatives/weaknesses and avoid using phrases such as "I only" or "I really don't have much experience in that area." Show confidence in yourself and your ability to perform the job! Finally, establish good eye contact with the interviewer and take an active part in the interview.

At some point in the interview, the interviewer will usually ask if you have any questions. Prepare two or three questions, in advance, that you want to ask during the interview. Ask questions that will help you form an opinion about whether the organization is right for you. Avoid asking questions for which answers could have been obtained in preparing for the interview. A list of sample questions is provided in this guide; however, make up your own questions to suit your career field and the employer. **Caution:** Do not ask about salary, bonuses, or vacation benefits during the initial screening interview. Let the interviewer introduce the subject of salary. If salary is discussed, be prepared to indicate a salary range that you would expect to receive.

### **At Conclusion of Interview**

Be alert for signs that the interview is coming to an end. At the conclusion, ask what the next step will be and when you can expect to know the results of the interview. Restate your interest in working for the organization and thank the interviewer for taking time to talk with you. The interviewer will usually close by telling you what the next step will be, such as "We will be making our decision within the next two weeks and will notify you by mail."

## **FOLLOW-UP**

After you leave the interview, make notes about what you discussed, including the next steps that you should take. These notes will be helpful in preparing for further interviews. Keep a log of addresses, phone numbers, dates of interviews, names of referrals, etc. Write a thank you note to the interviewer within 48 hours of the interview. Tell the interviewer you appreciated him/her taking time to see you and restate your interest in the position. If you do not hear from the employer within the specified time period, follow up with a phone call. Normally, if the employers are interested in you as a job candidate, you will be invited to visit their facilities to interview with additional people in your area of specialization.

## **PHONE SCREENING**

Many employers use phone interviews for their initial screening of job applicants who do not live within a close geographical range of their organization's facilities. If you plan to interview with an organization that is not in the Southern California area, be prepared to engage in a 30 minute phone interview with the employer's representative(s). Your voice quality and choice of words will be especially important during this type of interview. If successful, the employer will normally invite you to visit their facilities for more in depth interview(s).

## **BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEWS**

- What is a behavior-based interview?
- What do employers evaluate in a behavioral interview?
- Behavior vs. traditional interviews
- How can you best answer behavior-based questions?
- How can you prepare for a behavioral interview?

### **What is a behavior-based interview?**

Today, more than ever, every hiring decision is critical. Behavioral interviewing is designed to minimize personal impressions that can affect the hiring decision. By focusing on the applicant's actions and behaviors, rather than subjective impressions that can sometimes be misleading, interviewers can make more accurate hiring decisions.

Behavior-based interviewing focuses on experiences, behaviors, knowledge, skills, and abilities that are job related. It is based on the belief that past behavior and performance predicts future behavior and performance. You may use work experience, activities, hobbies, volunteer work, school projects, family life as examples of your past behavior. Current employment literature indicates that there is a strong trend towards this type of interviewing. In addition to questions found in many current resources, you should also consider the following in your interview preparations.

### **What do employers evaluate in a behavioral interview?**

Employers are looking for three types of skills: content skills, functional (also called transferable skills), and adaptive (also called self-management skills).

**Content Skills** - Knowledge that is work-specific (e.g., computer programming, accounting, welding, etc.), expressed as nouns.

**Functional or Transferable Skills** - Used with people, information, or things (e.g., organizing, managing, developing, communicating, etc.), expressed as verbs.

**Adaptive or Self-Management Skills** - Personal characteristics (e.g., dependable, team-player, self-directed, punctual, etc.) expressed as adjectives.

### **Behavioral vs. Traditional Interviews**

If you have training or experience with traditional interviewing techniques, you may find the behavioral interview quite different in several ways:

- Instead of asking how you would behave in a particular situation, the interviewer will ask you to describe how you did behave.
- Expect the interviewer to question and probe (think of "peeling the layers from an onion").
- The interviewer will ask you to provide details and will not allow you to theorize or generalize about several events.
- The interview will be a more-structured process that will concentrate on areas that are important to the interviewer, rather than allowing you to concentrate on areas that you may feel are important.
- You may not get a chance to deliver any prepared stories.
- Most interviewers will be taking copious notes throughout the interview.

The behavioral interviewer has been trained to objectively collect and evaluate information and works from a profile of desired behaviors that are needed for success on the job. Because the behaviors a candidate has demonstrated in previous similar positions are likely to be repeated, you will be asked to share situations in which you may or may not have exhibited these behaviors. Your answers will be tested for accuracy and consistency.

If you are an entry-level candidate with no previous related experience, the interviewer will look for behaviors in situations similar to those of the target position:

*"Describe a major problem you have faced and how you dealt with it."*

*"What class did you like the most? What did you like about it?"*

Follow-up questions will test for consistency and determine if you exhibited the desired behavior in that situation:

*"Can you give me an example?"*

*"What did you do?"*

*"What did you say?"*

*"What were you thinking?"*

*"How did you feel?"*

*"What was your role?"*

*"What was the result?"*

You will notice an absence of such questions as, "Tell me about your strengths and weaknesses."

### **How can I best answer behavior-based questions?**

Think of "Par for the Course." A complete answer to a behavior-based question must explain the task or problem for which you were responsible, the specific actions you took, and the results of your actions. Your answer must contain **all of these components to be a PAR answer. Tell the interviewer a "story" (with a beginning, middle, and an end) about how you used a practical skill.**

**Problem (P)** - Advertising revenue was falling off for the *Daily News*, and large numbers of long-term advertisers were not renewing contracts.

**Action (A)** - I designed a new promotional packet to go with the rate sheet and compared the benefits of DN circulation with other ad media in the area. I also set up a special training session for the account executives with a College of Business professor who discussed competitive selling strategies.

**Results (R)** - We signed contracts with fifteen former advertisers for daily ads, and five for special supplements. We increased our new advertisers by twenty percent (quantities are always good) over the same period last year.

### **How to prepare for a behavioral interview**

- Analyze the types of positions for which you are applying. Try to get an actual job description. Why are the specified skills required by the employers?
- Analyze your own background. What skills do you have (content, functional, and adaptive) that relate to your job objective.
- Recall recent situations that show favorable behaviors or actions, especially those involving course work, work experience, leadership, teamwork, initiative, planning, and customer service.
- Prepare short descriptions of each situation; be ready to give details if asked.
- Be sure each story has a beginning, middle, and an end (e.g., be ready to describe the situation, your action, and the outcome or result). Wherever possible, quantify your results. Numbers illustrate your level of authority and responsibility.
- Be sure the outcome or result reflects positively on you (even if the result itself was not favorable). Be prepared to provide an example of when results didn't turn out as you planned. What did you do then?
- Be honest. Don't embellish or omit any part of the story. The interviewer will find out if your story is built on a weak foundation.
- Be specific. Don't generalize about several events; give a detailed account of one event.

### **THE SECOND INTERVIEW**

**In preparing for your onsite visit with a prospective employer, you will want to:**

- Conduct more in depth research on the employer and industry.
- Be prepared to answer questions about your background and career interests. You may be asked the same questions you were asked in the initial screening interview; however, you will also be asked more in depth questions about your academic qualifications, extracurricular activities, prior work experience, and career objectives.
- Be prepared to ask job/career related questions. You will be judged on the quality of your questions and the depth of your interest in both the employer and job.
- Practice your interview and presentation skills. Anticipate and practice! Identify the strengths and key points that you want to stress during the interview. Review the qualities that employers seek in college graduates.

**On the day of the visit:**

- Be on time. Allow extra time for parking, getting lost, etc.
- Dress professionally.

- Review your interview agenda. Note the names and titles of the individuals/groups that you will be meeting with during the day. Usually you will interview with an average of five to six employer representatives during the day.
- Observe the work environment. Is it formal or relaxed? Would you like to work with the people you met during the interview? Does this employer seem like a good fit for you?
- Follow up in a timely manner with thank you letter(s).

### **SOME FINAL COMMENTS**

Be yourself. There is no special formula for excelling in a job interview. Your personality and background may appeal to some employers and not to others. It is to your advantage to be yourself, rather than try to mold yourself to fit an image you think will appeal to an employer. After all, you want to find a position and employer that is compatible with "who you are" and your career objectives.

Nonverbal communication influences the types of messages that you communicate to employers during your interviews. Some examples of nonverbal messages that you want to avoid include: sleepy appearance, mumbling, rambling, loud clothing, phony appearance, poor hygiene, crossing legs frequently, and other nervous habits (fidgeting, scratching head, wringing your hands). Role-playing experiences and videotaping your interviews are the best approaches for identifying both positive and negative nonverbal messages that you may be communicating in your interviews.

Self-confidence in one's ability to succeed at the unfamiliar and the untried is an important trait for individuals interviewing for jobs. This confidence comes from within and can be increased by knowing what your skills and strengths are, as well as knowing what assets you can offer to a prospective employer. Through interview preparation and practice, you can also increase your confidence in your interviewing skills and your ability to make a good impression.

### **QUALITIES EMPLOYERS LOOK FOR IN JOB CANDIDATES**

A pattern of success (e.g., your academic accomplishments, leadership qualities, activities)

Grades	Flexibility
Written and oral communication skills	Initiative/motivation
Related work experience	Enthusiasm
Interpersonal skills	Self-confidence
Leadership potential	Polished personal style
Decision-making and problem-solving skills	Honesty
Creativity and intelligence	Ability to get along with others-be a team-player
	Strong work ethic

### **KNOCKOUT FACTORS**

**Some reasons why applicants do not receive job offers or second interviews:**

- Inability to express oneself clearly - poor voice, diction, or grammar
- Poor personal appearance
- Not prepared for interview no research on the organization
- Overbearing overaggressive, conceited, "know-it-all"
- Uncertainty about future goals and career plans
- Inappropriate qualifications for position the organization wants to fill

- Lack of interest and enthusiasm - passive, indifferent
- Asks no or poor questions about the position
- Lack of confidence - nervousness, fails to look interviewer in the eye
- Failure to participate in activities
- Overemphasis on money - too interested in salary and vacation schedules
- Poor scholastic record - just got by
- Unwillingness to start at the bottom - expects too much, too soon
- Speaking derogatorily about former employers, supervisors, or other people
- Lack of maturity, courtesy, and tact

### **SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO ASK**

1. Describe the typical career path of this position.
2. What are the opportunities for advancement?
3. Is the company's policy to promote from within or outside?
4. How much responsibility is given to an individual after one year?
5. Describe the training program which new employees receive.
6. Does the organization support continued education? If so, in what way?
7. How does this position fit into the organizational structure?
8. What kind of person are you looking for?
9. What specific skills or experiences would help someone do well in this job?
10. What are some of the satisfactions and frustrations of this job?
11. How is the company dealing with changes in the industry?
12. What is the company's plans for growth?
13. What do you consider to be the organization's strengths and weaknesses?
14. Describe your organization's management style.
15. What is the work style of this company?
16. Are professional employees relocated?
17. Describe the supervision I will receive.
18. To whom would I be reporting?
19. Who are the other people I would work with?
20. Is the emphasis on teamwork or individual effort?